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ABSTRACT

Journalists have typically employed four rhetorical traditions--information, sensationalism, feature story, and the didactic approach--in conveying news; these affect the meaning received by audiences. Journalists play a variety of roles in this persuasive atmosphere and are deeply involved in the construction of rhetorical visions about terrorism and its perpetrators. Journalists amplify, arbitrate, and create their own rhetoric about terrorist acts. In the role of rhetorical amplifiers, journalists gain the attention of audiences and convey messages about political violence by providing the platform and amplification system by which this can be accomplished. As arbitrators of rhetoric, journalists have limited success. Evidence of arbitration is seen in comparisons between how media personnel describe terrorist events and their perpetrators and how government officials make similar descriptions. Journalists serve as creators of rhetoric whenever they report terrorist events. The rhetorical tradition employed determines the nature of that rhetoric. The role of formats, the presentation conventions that are used to package information and determine the significance and the information that news packages carry, are also important. The effects of these roles are beginning to receive appropriate scrutiny. Journalists must be made sensitive to the power of what they report, but when dealing with the volatile area of reporting on terrorism, they must be especially sensitive to how they report the news as well. (One figure and 26 references are attached.) (MG)

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THE JOURNALIST'S ROLE IN COVERAGE OF TERRORIST EVENTS

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Although journalists consider themselves dispassionate recorders of terrorist events, conveying objective and factual information about incidents, their roles in such events are seen quite differently by authorities, media critics, and scholars. These differences in view result because journalists have traditionally employed four rhetorical traditions in conveying news, and these affect the meaning received by audiences.

The first is the information tradition, which emphasizes factual information and documentation of events. When this is employed, a calm, dispassionate conveyance of information occurs. Such "raw journalism" is often found in initial news reports of terrorist events. The second tradition, sensationalism, is emotional. Material is presented in ways that emphasize alarm, threat, provocation, anger, and fear. This type of presentation, which is used in a variety of types of reporting, works well in the reporting of conflict and terrorism because the subject is likely to bring an emotional response and contains inherently dramatic and tragic elements that can be sensationally reported.

The third journalistic tradition of storytelling is that of the feature story, which contains significant symbolism and often focuses on individuals as heroes or villains, victims or

perpetrators. This type of story focuses on individuals to provide a context that helps to put news events and larger issues into a personal perspective. In the reporting of terrorism, this can take the form of stories about what it was like to be a hostage or what it is like to live in a repressive nation in which individuals are striking out at the government. The fourth tradition, the didactic approach, stresses explanation and education about how and why things work. Articles about the tactics of terrorists or authorities often fall into this category.

Which of these traditions is utilized helps to determine the meaning conveyed about the events. A dispassionate approach will result in a less emotional response or lessened fear on the part of the reader. A sensationalistic approach can increase fear and, not incidentally, improve newspaper sales and television viewership. An approach emphasizing violence and threat might make the news appear more significant than an approach that downplays such violence. A news report about any incident can be constructed by employing any of the traditions (see Figure 1). Which tradition is selected depends upon the reporter and editors involved.

When the information tradition is employed, the accuracy of description of overt occurrences is generally high. Government officials, for instance, rely heavily on journalistic accounts of events and often take as long as 36 to 48 hours to get response teams in place that can collect their own information when

incidents take place in other nations.

Terrorist acts are not merely random events, however. Most incidents of terrorism are symbolic, with meaning assigned to them by those who perpetrate the acts, as well as officials, victims, and journalists. Thus, the kind of reporting, the techniques used, and the messages conveyed in the news are crucial in helping form the meaning assigned to acts by media audiences.

Journalistic emphases on descriptions of what is visible, however, can easily create distortions and confusion in the meaning that is constructed by audiences because most of what occurs in terrorist events is invisible to journalists; they must rely upon information and statements from authorities about the events. Victims and their friends and relatives are sometimes available, but their knowledge of events is generally limited to the overt violence and its aftermath.

Because of the inability to significantly explore events and dependence upon official sources, much terrorism coverage involves significant struggles for rhetorical control (Gerbner, 1988; Crelinsten, 1987). Journalists play a variety of roles in this persuasive atmosphere and are deeply involved in the construction of rhetorical visions about terrorism and its perpetrators. Journalists amplify, arbitrate, and create their own rhetoric about terrorist acts.

Journalists as Rhetorical Amplifiers

In this role, journalists gain the attention of audiences and convey messages about political violence by providing the platform and amplification system by which this can be accomplished.

Dowling (1986, pp. 18-19) argues that this amplification is important because a primary rhetorical message of terrorists is to gain the attention of and convey their existence to the public. Thus, violent events are created in order to gain coverage that will convey this message to audiences.

Another objective of some terrorists is to gain forums in which to air their grievances and ideas, acts often separated from specific violence. Because media organizations are institutions that support and perpetuate the basic norms and values of the dominant order, such access is rarely provided to those groups at the fringes of society. Because terrorists do not operate within the acceptable parameters of normal society, their views are rarely conveyed within media. By engaging in violence, terrorists hope to force journalists to attend to views, and to expose and explain their beliefs (Picard, 1986). This is why many perpetrators of political violence issue statements to be published and broadcast and are willing to grant interviews to reporters.

Weimann (1983) has shown media coverage to be beneficial to terrorists by increasing awareness of their existence and "recognition of the political, racial, or religious problem that

caused the event" (p. 44). This benefit is not widely available, however, because journalists only rarely amplify messages about the situational causes of such violence (Palatz, Ayanian, and Fozzard, 1982b; Decker and Rainey, 1982; Atwater, 1987; Milburn, Bowley, Fay-Dumaine, and Kennedy, 1987), unless lengthy, on-going terrorist events are reported (Picard, 1987) or specialty media--those not intended for mass, general audiences--are involved (Fuller, 1988).

Journalists also amplify the rhetoric of government officials and leaders of other institutions targeted in or responding to political violence. The primary goals of such rhetoric are to show society's strength and stability, to marginalize perpetrators, and to gain support for public policies. The primary means by which these goals are supported are through the official rhetoric that defines and explains terrorist incidents and their significance that is conveyed during news conferences, interviews with reporters, and during other appearances on news and talk shows. Journalists, who are highly dependent on official sources for information and statements, thus amplify officials' rhetoric that creates a perceptual reality for the audience. Government views and reactions thus become a major focus of news coverage of terrorist events, and officials and former officials are the main sources of information and comment (Paletz, Ayanian, and Fozzard, 1982; Atwater, 1987; Picard, 1987; Atwater and Green, 1988).

Journalists as Arbitrators of Rhetoric

Because journalists rely heavily on easily identifiable news values in making decisions about whether to cover events, media organizations are vulnerable to manipulation by terrorists and interested parties, including government officials and supporters of terrorism (Picard, 1989). In such situations journalists attempt to arbitrate the rhetoric of perpetrators and interested parties with their own agendas so that the ability to manipulate coverage does not alter the meaning of events in such ways that reality is distorted. Unfortunately, journalists' success in doing so is often limited.

Evidence of arbitration is seen in comparisons of how media personnel describe terrorist events and their perpetrators and how government officials make similar descriptions. Adams and Picard (1987) found that media and witnesses tended to use more neutral or straight-forward words and terms in descriptions, whereas government officials use inflammatory and judgmental words and terms. Thus what journalists and witnesses might describe as an a "explosion," officials would be labeled a "despicable attack by those with no regard for life."

The difficulty of arbitrating authorities' rhetoric is compounded because journalists rarely have direct entry to the site of the events and because access to participants in incidents is rare. The perpetrators of terrorism are almost always unavailable for comment and the security and policy officials directly involved rarely make themselves available to

journalists.

The inability of journalists to make contact with individuals with first-hand knowledge and participation in events thus forces journalists to seek substitutes. These substitutes are typically elected or appointed political officials who have little knowledge about the incident but rather have specific policy agendas relating to terrorism or the conflicts related to the violence. Journalists also seek out security experts for comment, but those who are available generally do not have specific knowledge of the event or often do not know who perpetrated it. In many cases, the specialists are former government security or political officials who are also guided by policy agendas.

Cooper (1988) has argued that journalists covering terrorist incidents with international aspects do so with adversarial perspectivism that affects how they view incidents and explanations of incidents. These factors thus make it impossible for journalists to objectively report such events outside of the perspective of their national interests.

Such factors result in unequal arbitration of the rhetoric of the political violence and authorities that ultimately favors the status quo.

Journalists as Creators of Rhetoric

It was noted above that journalists create rhetoric whenever they report terrorist events and that the rhetorical tradition

employed determines the nature of that rhetoric. Also important is the role of formats, that is, presentation conventions that are used to package information and that determine the significance and the information that news packages carry. Elements of such formats are the focus of the report, the sources of information, and the actual means by which these and other elements are presented.

Print and broadcast formats diverge when it comes to the means by which information is packaged for delivery to audiences because of the inherent differences in the medium of delivery. Spatial and temporal elements of the two media differ significantly; these influence how information is provided and thus influence the structure and amount of information delivered. Television utilizes video and live representations that are unavailable to print media and thus can convey information with more immediacy and urgency.

On television, several types of packaging formats are typically used to deal with terrorist incidents: news bulletins, news breaks, newscasts, news magazines, current affairs talk shows, and documentaries. Each have their own conventions for use of materials. Format differences also exist in newspaper coverage. Presentation formats include news briefs, shorts, first-day stories, second- day and follow-up stories, news features; and interviews.

The dominant portrayals of terrorism on television come in the forms of news bulletins, news breaks, and newscasts, and most

newspaper reports are briefs, shorts, and first-day reports. In both media, audiences receive short, staccato presentations that provide little contextual information and emphasize dramatic elements of conflict, threat, and casualties.

Formats selected for news reports about terrorism produce significantly different types of messages and meaning. News reports focus on events and tactics, while documentaries and interviews focus on causes and purposes. Altheide (1986) has shown that because few opportunities are presented for the latter type of format, journalists exercise significant control over information and its meaning.

The emphasis on short news reports thus creates significant misunderstanding about events and issues. Larson (1986) has argued that news coverage of Iran before the fall of the Shah, which consisted mainly of short news items, did not deal with political opposition in any systematic way and denigrated its importance. As a result, audiences received a mistaken view of the strength of the opposition, and the collapse of the government surprised many.

Developments that surrounded the formation of the new Iranian government and the seizure of the U.S. Embassy were also reported in a way that distorted the meaning of the events and kept the public from understanding that a religious rather than merely a political revolution was underway.

Several studies also reveal that the themes and issues addressed in coverage of terrorism also cast meanings upon news

that have effects upon the perceptions of audiences. Palmerton (1985; 1988) argues that reporters covering the embassy seizure focused extensively on the policies and actions of the U.S. government, conveyed the meaning that U.S. government actions helped cause the seizure to take place, suggested that military intervention would reestablish control, and ultimately projected an image of powerlessness that the Iranians were able to exploit. Nevertheless, it appears that journalists did not depart significantly from official views and policy in dealing with the incident. Altheide (1981) has argued that both the content and style of television coverage supported administration policy during the event and that reporters acted as intermediaries between the U.S. government, the Iranian government, and the militants holding the embassy personnel hostage.

The image of the president and the leaders of Iran created by media rhetoric were examined by Dowling (1984), who found that journalists portrayed the Iranians as opportunistic or irrational, but that they differed in their presentations of President Carter. Some journalists portrayed him as strong, good, and restrained, whereas others portrayed him as weak, selfish, and ineffective.

Lule (1988a; 1988b) studied media rhetoric about victims of terrorism and found that journalists provided rhetorical visions that portrayed the victims as symbolic sacrifices in a manner that provoked intense identification with the victims by audiences.

Summary

Much of the research on media coverage of terrorism has focused on what is covered, how it is covered, how extensively it is covered. and other such issues that provide a descriptive and exploratory base for understanding coverage. More important, however, is the meaning of the messages conveyed. Journalists' roles in coverage of terrorism help the public develop perceptions about the world around them and the ways in which audiences relate to actors in terrorism.

The difficulties caused by the roles of journalists result from the selective use of labels and the word "terrorism" to identify acts and perpetrators and from the traditions and formats used in constructing news reports about incidents.

The effects of these roles are beginning to receive appropriate scrutiny, as evidenced by the growing body of studies emphasizing the results of the social dramas presented by journalists and this panel. Journalists, obviously, must be made sensitive to the power of what they report, but when dealing with the volatile area of reporting on terrorism, they must be especially sensitive to how they report the news as well.

Although many journalists are now concerned about the effects of their coverage on the outcomes of specific incidents of political violence and its effects on perpetrators and authorities, most journalists are unaware of or less concerned with the effects of their roles on the public because of the

broader perceptions created by coverage. I believe this lack of concern will diminish as rhetorical scholars continue to address the social and political effects of the coverage and continue to explore and reveal its importance.

FIGURE 1

SAMPLE LEADS FOR NEWS STORIES

USING DIFFERENT RHETORICAL TRADITIONS

Information Tradition

"Four persons were killed and 33 others injured when a bomb exploded in a cafe in downtown Paris Thursday."

Sensationalist Tradition

"A terrorist bomb ripped a crowded Paris cafe Thursday, mortally wounding four persons and leaving 33 persons covered with blood from their injuries."

Feature Story Tradition

"A couple on their honeymoon was killed Thursday when a bomb destroyed a Paris cafe. The bride and groom, who had been married for less than 24 hours, were among 4 persons killed and 33 wounded when the bomb exploded."

Didactic Tradition

"The bombing of a Paris cafe Thursday is believed to signal an new wave of violence by Moslem fundamentalists angered by French foreign policy in the Middle East."

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